



Former President Richard M. Nixon and translator General Vernon Walters with Pope Paul VI at a 1968 meeting in the Vatican.

Soldier, Spy—Tinkered Out

Walters was a spy and a presidential translator, but he's boring anyway.

Old soldiers never die: they just write their memoirs. In fact, that's one more problem with the armed forces' policy of allowing people to retire at a comparatively young age: it gives military men all the more time to inflict their memoirs upon us.

The latest such perpetrator is General Vernon A. Walters, author of *Silent Missions* (Doubleday, \$12.95), who came to national attention during the Watergate investigation. Throughout his years of service, General Walters faced many of the enemies of our country—from the German Nazis to the Italian Fascists to Richard M. Nixon. It was Nixon who came closest to destroying him.

At the time of the Watergate break-in, General Walters was deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency. On orders from the White House, Walters asked the FBI to curtail its Watergate investigation on the pretext that CIA secrets might be exposed. He later rescinded that request when he persuaded himself that CIA secrets were not in danger. Therefore, the FBI forged ahead.

General Walters' memoir deals only briefly with Watergate and adds nothing new to the story. So don't pick up this book expecting, as I did, another Watergate book. Walters evidently said just about everything he had to say about the scandal during his twenty or so appearances as a witness before various investigating panels. Most of the book is dedicated to a long review of his Army career, from World War II to Vietnam. What makes Walters' story slightly unusual is that along the way he happened to act as translator for five Presidents.

Of course, translating for Presidents was hardly a full-time job. Walters spent most of his time working for the Defense

Intelligence Agency (DIA), which makes Walters a curious choice for presidential translator and raises all sorts of questions. One wonders: did he report back to his bosses at the DIA on what our Presidents said to foreign leaders? In other words, did he spy on five American Presidents? Did the Presidents know their translator was a spy by trade? And if they did know, why did they hire him for such a sensitive job? Whatever the answers to these questions, hiring him seems to make about as much sense as a President's bugging himself in the Oval Office.

Like most military memoirs, though, *Silent Missions* is not so much a book as a collection of eccentric footnotes to the history of our times.

Footnote 1: On Wake Island, General Douglas MacArthur did not keep President Harry Truman waiting, but he did not salute him, either. As you will recall, a controversy has brewed for years over whether the arrogant general showed disrespect for his President by not meeting his plane. Walters, who was there, says that MacArthur met the plane but managed to show disrespect anyway. Years later, Walters visited Truman in Independence and asked: "Mr. President, when you arrived at Wake Island and came down the steps from the plane, did you notice that . . ." Truman interrupted: "Did I notice that MacArthur did not salute the President of the United States? You are goddamned right I noticed. I was sorry, because I knew it meant I was going to have trouble with him."

Footnote 2: President Nixon sent Walters on a foreign policy mission that he wanted kept secret from Kissinger. Nixon wanted Walters to talk to General Franco about who would rule Spain after he died.

Walters directed me to dictate my report upon my return to his own secretary, Rosemary

Woods, rather than to the girls in Henry Kissinger's office." Not even Nixon trusted Kissinger.

Footnote 3: President Nixon might not have installed the White House taping system if Walters had only cooperated. As Nixon's translator, Walters used to write up a memorandum on every conversation he sat in on—which gave Nixon an idea. Walters reports: "Haldeman . . . told me that President Nixon had been greatly impressed by my ability to write extensive memoranda of conversations without taking any notes. He wanted to know if I would be interested in . . . attending all of the President's meetings . . . and recording what had transpired. . . . I replied that I was grateful for the offer but I was really not interested in such a job. . . . I believe that not long after this conversation with Haldeman the tape recorder was installed in the White House." If Walters had worked out as a human tape recorder, perhaps the White House crowd would later have asked him to go over and hide in Larry O'Brien's Watergate office. That would have avoided a lot of problems.

Since you now know the above, there is absolutely no reason to read this book. Another reason not to read *Silent Missions* is that it must be one of the worst edited books ever printed. Parts of paragraphs are reprinted almost verbatim in several different chapters.

Like MacArthur, a lot of old soldiers seem to vow, "I shall return," and make their comeback as authors. Unfortunately for these soldiers, however, the Vietnam war has altered the way we look at war, war stories, the military, even manhood. Walters' Army point of view now seems as dated as a Betty Grable photo. It's too late. Old soldiers never die; they just bore the rest of us to death. ††